

ZEPHANIAH

INTRODUCTION

1. Title. Like the prophecies of other Minor Prophets, the book of Zephaniah is simply called by the name of the author. Zephaniah, Heb. *Ṣephanyah*, means “Yahweh has hidden,” or “Yahweh has treasured.” This name was borne by others in the OT (see 1 Chron. 6:36; Jer. 21:1; Zech. 6:10, 14).

2. Authorship. We know nothing of this prophet aside from what he says of himself in his book. It seems certain from ch. 1:1 that he came from a distinguished family. The fact that he traces his ancestry back to “Hizkiah,” or Hezekiah, may be taken as an indication that he refers to the king of Judah who bore that name, and thus implies his royal heritage (see on ch. 1:1).

3. Historical Setting. The prophet gives as the time of his prophecy (ch. 1:1) the reign of Josiah, king of Judah (640–609 B.C.). Inasmuch as Zephaniah predicted the overthrow of Nineveh (ch. 2:13), an event that occurred in 612 B.C., it is most likely he prophesied in the earlier part of Josiah’s reign. Perhaps he was contemporaneous with Habakkuk. See further on p. 23.

4. Theme. The book of Zephaniah, like that of Joel, focuses on “the day of the Lord.” For the meaning of this expression see on Isa. 2:12. Not only does the prophet reveal the coming judgment upon Israel; he also warns of punishment to come upon other nations. However, if Zephaniah alarms by his severe judgments, it is only that the people may repent, may “seek righteousness, seek meekness” (ch. 2:3), and thus escape the punishment.

5. Outline.

- I. Judgment Upon Judah for Her Sins, 1:1–18.
 - A. The superscription, 1:1.
 - B. The severity and extent of the judgment, 1:2–18.
- II. An Appeal to Seek the Lord While Probation Lingers, 2:1–3.
- III. Judgments Upon Various Nations, 2:4–15.
 - A. Upon Philistia, 2:4–7.
 - B. Upon Moab and Ammon, 2:8–11.
 - C. Upon Ethiopia, 2:12.
 - D. Upon Assyria, 2:13–15.
- IV. Jerusalem Rebuked for Her Sins, 3:1–7.
- V. Judgment Upon All Nations, 3:8.
- VI. Promises of Restoration, 3:9–20.

CHAPTER 1

God’s severe judgment against Judah for divers sins.

1. Word of the Lord. The message was not Zephaniah’s, but God’s (see 2 Sam. 23:1, 2; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; 2 Peter 1:21).

Hizkiah. Identical in Hebrew with “Hezekiah.” The fact that Zephaniah’s ancestry is traced back four generations, whereas usually only a prophet’s father is mentioned, if any ancestry is given at all, lends weight to the view that this “Hezekiah” was especially noteworthy, most likely the king of Judah by that name. Also, the time interval between these personages is such that Zephaniah could well have been the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, the king.

2. From off the land. Literally, “from upon the face of the ground”; this expression, especially when taken with the first part of the verse, indicates the severity of the coming judgments. The prophet here refers specifically to the land of Judah, to whose rulers and people his message of judgment was originally addressed (see chs. 1:1, 4, 12; 2:1).

3. Man and beast. The curse resulting from sin rests, not on man only, but on the remainder of creation as well (Gen. 3:17; Rom. 8:19–22).

Stumblingblocks. All idols, wicked schemes, errors, deceptions, all the “fruit” of iniquity, will be destroyed along with the sinners themselves (see Jer. 17:10; Matt. 7:17–19; Rom. 6:21).

4. Mine hand. The hand is a symbol of power, for it is the instrument by which a man exercises his power (see Joshua 4:24).

Remnant. All that remains of Baal. The LXX of this clause reads, “I will remove the names of Baal” (see on Hosea 2:17).

Chemarims. Idolatrous priests appointed by the kings of Judah to conduct worship in high places (see on Hosea 10:5).

5. Host of heaven. From ancient times the sun, moon, and stars have been worshiped as representatives of the powers of nature and prime movers of earthly events (see Jer. 8:2; 19:13; see on Deut. 4:19). Manasseh, king of Judah, and probably a great-great-uncle of Zephaniah (see on Zeph. 1:1), especially fostered this worship (see 2 Kings 21:3).

Housetops. On these flat roofs families made altars to worship the heavenly bodies, offered animal sacrifices, and burned incense (see on Jer. 19:13).

That swear. The last half of v. 5 refers to the compromisers who combined the worship of the Lord with that of stars and other gods.

Malcham. The Ammonite god, more correctly called Milcom, mentioned in several ancient documents. See on 1 Kings 11:7.

6. Turned back. Here the prophet denounces the out-and-out apostates, who have rejected the worship of the true God.

Not sought. The last half of v. 6 refers to those who were indifferent to the Lord, and without interest in religion.

7. Hold thy peace. Silence and awe are in order because fearful judgments will come upon various classes of people (vs. 7–13). Compare Hab. 2:20.

Day of the Lord. Here the prophet is referring to the impending punishment attending the Babylonian invasion (see on Isa. 13:6). Nevertheless, it must be remembered that Zephaniah’s “prophecies of impending judgment upon Judah apply with equal force to the judgments that are to fall upon an impenitent world at the time of the second advent of Christ” (PK 389). For the principles involved in making last-day applications see pp. 34–38.

Sacrifice. A graphic picture, representing the guilty nation of Judah as a slaughtered animal (see Isa. 34:6; Eze. 39:17–20).

Bid his guests. Literally, “consecrated his guests”; that is, the Babylonians are depicted as being set apart, according to God’s purpose, to carry out the punishment of the transgressors (see on Isa. 13:3).

8. Princes. This includes the chief officials of the state.

King’s children. The members of the royal family. Very likely, the king, Josiah, was not mentioned here because he was loyal to the Lord (see 2 Chron. 34:1, 2, 26–28).

Strange. Heb. *nakri*, “foreign,” or “alien.” Foreign dress may have indicated heathen manners and customs among the people (see Isa. 3:16–24). The children of Israel were to be reminded by their dress that they were a special people, dedicated to God’s service (see Num. 15:37–41).

9. Leap on the threshold. The meaning of this expression is not clear. Perhaps a pagan custom is here described (see on 1 Sam. 5:5). Some think the words express the eagerness with which the servants carry out the commands of their wicked masters. Others refer the “threshold” to the houses of the poor who are being robbed. Those who, as retainers of others, carry out “violence and deceit” to enrich their masters must suffer with the masters in the coming punishments.

Violence. Heb. *chamas* (see on Hab. 1:2).

10. Noise. The Babylonians are now pictured as breaking into the places where the merchants and usurers dwelt.

Fish gate. Probably in the middle of the northern wall of the city. It was so called because nearby was a fish market, where the Tyrians sold their fish (see on Neh. 3:3).

Second. Heb. *mishneh*, the second district, or quarter. See on 2 Kings 22:14.

11. Maktesh. Literally, “the mortar,” “the grinder,” or “the molar [tooth].” Many scholars think that *maktesh* is here the name of a section of Jerusalem. The context (see v. 10) seems to favor this view.

Bear silver. Literally, “lift silver,” or “weigh silver.” This refers to those who added to their wealth through trade, or those who, as usurers, weighed out silver. The LXX of this final clause reads: “and all that were exalted by silver have been utterly destroyed.”

12. Jerusalem. The capital and representative of the whole nation.

With candles. A figure showing the intensity of the search that the enemies of Judah will carry out in order to slaughter or capture as many as possible.

On their lees. Or, “on their dregs.” That is, the people were hardened in their iniquitous ways. The professed followers of the Lord in the days of Zephaniah did not realize, as many Christians do not realize today, that there must be no relaxation in our spiritual warfare this side of heaven. No one should rest content with his present spiritual attainments. Only as we show continual progress are we living up to our God-given opportunities. Complacency is the greatest enemy of a living Christian experience.

Say in their heart. A false concept of God always results in a wrong pattern of conduct. The people here referred to were practically deists. They agreed there was a God but conceived of Him as an absentee Ruler who cared little for His people and paid little attention to them. His promises of blessing and warnings of punishment were alike meaningless. He was no different from the gods of the heathen.

13. But not inhabit. Those who were continual transgressors of the law of God would receive a punishment, the very opposite of the reward given to those who remain faithful to the Lord (see Isa. 65:21).

14. Great day of the Lord. See on v. 7.

Near. Having pointed out particularly those who will experience the divine chastisement, Zephaniah again warns (see v. 7) that this punishment is so close that its “voice,” the sound of its approach, can be heard.

Bitterly. Heb. *mar*, “bitter.” As an alternate translation, this word may be taken as an adjective modifying “voice.” Thus the RSV reads: “The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter.”

15. That day. The prophet graphically describes the fearful effects of that day: the blazing forth of God’s “wrath” (see Isa. 9:19), the “trouble and distress” upon men (see Job 15:23, 24), “a day of darkness and gloominess” (see Joel 2:2; Amos 5:18, 20).

16. Trumpet. The signal for battle, or of the enemy’s approach (see Amos 2:2; see on Jer. 4:5). The battle here signaled would result in the destruction of the nation of Judah.

Fenced cities. That is, strongly fortified cities.

High towers. Turrets were usually placed at the angles of the walls for adequate defense against besiegers.

17. Like blind men. A description of the fearful confusion coming upon the nation.

As the dung. The unburied corpses of the people will be left rotting on the ground (see on Jer. 9:22).

18. Silver. The wealth of the people would be unable to purchase security from destruction (see Isa. 13:17; Eze. 7:19). How little value are riches to men in their times of deepest distress!

In the land. Or, “in the earth.”

ELLEN G. WHITE COMMENTS

2, 3, 8, 9 9T 95

12 FE 240; TM 448; 3T 271; 5T 99, 211, 308

12, 13 GC 310

12–189T 95

14 CS 35; Ed 270; Ev 40, 218; 1T 361; 5T 101, 266; 6T 14, 22; 7T 272; 9T 48, 101

14–175T 98; 8T 278

14–18PK 390; 3T 271

15 1T 135

15, 16, 18 GC 310

18 3T 549

CHAPTER 2

1 *An exhortation to repentance.* 4 *The judgment of the Philistines, 8 of Moab and Ammon, 12 of Ethiopia and Assyria.*

1. Gather yourselves. Since association adds strength through common counsel, united confession, and appealing to God, the prophet admonishes his people to assemble together (see Heb. 10:24, 25; cf. Joel 1:14; 2:16–18).

Desired. Heb. *kasaph*, meaning literally, “to become pale” (thus *keseeph*, “the pale metal,” is “silver”). *Kasaph*, in the form used here, has two possible meanings, “to long for,” and “to be ashamed.” If Judah was “not longed for,” it means the nation was not worthy of God’s love and protection. If the nation was “not ashamed,” it means that the people had no proper sense of guilt for their sins (see Isa. 29:22).

2. The decree. That is, God’s purpose to punish Judah (see ch. 1:2, 4, 8, 18). For the latter-day application, see on ch. 1:7).

3. Seek ye. Addressing those who claim to serve God and obey His law, the prophet encourages them to hold firm for God.

Meek. Those opposite in character to the proud, self-sufficient, and shameless addressed previously (see on v. 1). Concerning the spirit of pride see on Matt. 5:5.

Wrought. Though Judah had become apostate and degenerate, there were those who remained loyal to God.

It may be. Heb. *'ulay*, “perhaps”; an expression of hope, pleading, or fear.

4. Gaza. Four of the five principal cities of the Philistines are named here to represent the whole of that country (see Amos 1:6–8). Like Amos, Zephaniah omits mention of Gath (see on Amos 1:6).

Noon. Since this was the hottest part of the day, a time when the enemy would be least likely to attack, the expression “at the noon day” evidently means “unexpectedly,” or “suddenly” (see Jer. 15:8).

5. Cherethites. The Cherethites are believed to have inhabited the southern part of the Philistine seacoast (see on 1 Sam. 30:14). The LXX has *paroikoi Krētōn*, “the neighbors of the Cretans,” or “the sojourners among the Cretans.”

6. Dwellings. Literally, “pasturelands.”

7. Coast. This will be given to the “remnant” of Judah when they return to their land (see Obadiah 17–20).

Visit. Here the purpose of God’s “visit” is for good and blessing (see on Ps. 8:4; 59:5). The prophet expresses a firm confidence that his people will be restored from the Babylonian captivity, and evidently considers the overthrow of Philistia as preparatory to that event.

8. Reproach of Moab. The descendants of Lot, the Moabites and the Ammonites, were the unrelenting enemies of the Israelites, although they were related to them by blood (see on Amos 1:13; 2:1).

Against their border. The LXX reads, “against my coasts.” As the Lord called Israel “my people,” so the boundaries of the nation could properly be called “my” borders, and their violation was an offense against God (see Deut. 32:8, 9).

9. Lord of hosts. See on Jer. 7:3. God so speaks of Himself to show that the resources of His strength will make effective His threat against His people’s enemies.

Surely Moab. The proximity of the Moabites and the Ammonites to the Dead Sea, the vicinity of ancient Sodom and Gomorrah (see on Gen. 13:10), would make more forceful this prophecy against these neighbors of Judah.

10. Lord of hosts. See on v. 9; Jer. 7:3.

11. Famish. Heb. *razah*, “to diminish.” The prophet was looking forward to the time when God would cause “all the gods of the earth” to diminish, a time when they would have no more worshipers to offer them sacrifices.

Every one. See Isa. 19:18, 19; Mal. 1:11.

Isles. Or, “coastlands.” A reference to distant countries reached by sea travel.

12. Ethiopians. Heb. *Kushim*, “Cushites,” or “inhabitants of Cush” (see on Gen. 10:6). *Kush* included Nubia and some parts of Arabia bordering on the Red Sea.

13. Assyria. While Assyria appeared prosperous and flourishing, the prophet foretold that it would also suffer the divine wrath (see Isa. 10:12; Eze. 31:3–12; the book of Nahum).

Dry like a wilderness. The abundant fertility of Nineveh was due to irrigation. When the irrigation system was destroyed, it did not take long for Nineveh to become an arid region.

14. Flocks. A detailed description is given here of the “desolation” to come upon Nineveh (see v. 13). In graphic language the prophet pictures the absence of human inhabitants in the ruins of the city.

Cormorant. Heb. *qa’ath*, a bird not identified positively; possibly the “owl,” the “pelican,” or the “vulture” (RSV).

Bittern. Heb. *qippod*, probably the “short-eared owl,” *Asio flammeus*; by some it is believed to be the hedgehog, *Erinaceus auritus*.

15. Carelessly. Or, literally, “securely,” “safely,” or “undisturbed.” The city is pictured as being without fear of attack. In her pride Nineveh arrogated to herself the very attributes of Deity, “I am, and there is none beside me” (cf. Isa. 14:13, 14; Isa. 47:7; Rev. 18:7).

Hiss. To show derision or scorn (see Jer. 19:8; Micah 6:16).

Wag his hand. A gesture of contemptuous dismissal.

ELLEN G. WHITE COMMENTS

1–3PK 390; 1T 180; 5T 99

3 MYP 90; 1T 426, 619; 2T 222, 405, 438; 5T 137

14 PK 365

15 PK 364

CHAPTER 3

1 *A sharp reproof of Jerusalem for divers sins.* 8 *An exhortation to wait for the restoration of Israel,* 14 *and to rejoice for their salvation by God.*

1. Woe. Turning to Jerusalem, Zephaniah warns her that God’s punishment of the wicked will include also the hardened sinners of Judah (vs. 1–5).

Filthy. From the Heb. *mara’*, which, according to some authorities, means “to be rebellious”; according to others, “to be filthy.”

2. The voice. That is, God’s voice, as expressed in the Law and by the prophets (see Jer. 7:23–28; 9:13).

Correction. That which God sent for the nation’s good, they “received not.”

Trusted not. In times of trouble Judah often trusted for help in foreign alliances, in idols, and “not in the Lord.”

3. Roaring lions. The leaders of Judah devoured the people as prey (see Prov. 28:15). During the minority of King Josiah such a course would be comparatively easy.

Evening wolves. See Eze. 22:27; Hab. 1:8. These predatory animals hunted for and devoured their helpless prey chiefly at night.

4. Prophets. That is, the false prophets (see Micah 2:11; 3:5).

Light. Literally, “insolent,” or “dissolute.”

¹Nichol, F. D. (1978). *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary : The Holy Bible with exegetical and expository comment*. Commentary Reference Series (Zep 1:1). Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

Sanctuary. These wicked priests made no difference between the holy and the profane (see Eze. 22:26).

Law. Heb. *torah* (see on Deut. 31:9; Prov. 3:1). The priests, who were supposed to be the guardians of God's teachings and the ones to disseminate the light of God's truth (see on 2 Chron. 15:3), were the very ones who turned the people away from God's law.

5. In the midst. The transgressors are sharply reminded that God is ever among them, witnessing His righteousness through the Temple, its services, and its true worshipers, thus removing every excuse for disobedience to His will.

6. Cut off. The transgressors well knew that in the past the Lord had "cut off" wicked nations, such as the Canaanites, when the Israelites possessed the Land of Promise, and also the northern kingdom of Israel, destroyed by Assyria. So Judah, along with other nations, was here warned of God's retributive punishment for sin.

None inhabitant. This somewhat figurative prophecy was fulfilled during the final siege of Jerusalem, even before the city fell (see on Jer. 32:43). The figurative language employed simply meant that Judah would become desolate.

7. Surely. Such past punishments inflicted upon "the nations" (see on v. 6) should have taught the Israelites to repent and obey God.

Howsoever I punished them. Literally, "all that I have visited upon her" (see on Ps. 8:4; 59:5). The LXX reads, "all the vengeance I have brought upon her." In other words, if Jerusalem and Judah would not reform, sure punishment would be theirs.

Rose early. A Hebrew idiom meaning to do something eagerly or earnestly (see on Jer. 7:13).

8. Therefore. As these sinners will not repent, divine chastisement is certain.

Day. Probably a reference to the chastisement inflicted upon Judah and other nations by the Babylonians.

The nations. The prophet here probably refers, primarily at least, to the nations mentioned in ch. 2:4–15 (see on Joel 3:2).

All the earth. See on ch. 1:2.

The Masoretes (see Vol. I, pp. 34, 35) have noted that this is the only verse in the entire OT containing all 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

9. For then. This passage clearly indicates a time of restoration for Israel. No matter from what nation or tongue they might be, all those who will join Israel in worshiping the true God will speak a "pure language," no longer polluted by idolatry in any of its forms (see Ps. 16:4; Hosea 2:17).

10. From beyond. Anything "beyond" Ethiopia would be symbolic of the uttermost reaches of the earth.

Ethiopia. Heb. *Kush* (see on ch. 2:12).

Offering. Heb. *minchah*, here used of a gift presented to God (see on Lev. 2:1).

11. In that day. The prophet points forward to a time when the children of the Lord will serve Him sincerely and wholeheartedly.

Take away. In that day those who in self-sufficiency, in "pride," have walked in their own way, have trusted in the material and the secular instead of in God, will be destroyed (see Isa. 2:12–22).

Holy mountain. See on Isa. 11:9.

12. Afflicted. Heb. *'ani*, here perhaps better translated “lowly,” as in Zech. 9:9, or “humble,” as in Ps. 9:12. The word for “poor” may likewise be translated “humble.” The prophet is describing the character qualifications of the remnant. It was God’s purpose that no self-exalted, self-sufficient, conceited individuals should be found among His children.

13. Remnant. See on Joel 2:32. The “remnant” here referred to is the group mentioned in v. 12 who would “trust in the name of the Lord.” They are the ones who would remain in Judah after the sinners of the land had been consumed. The prophet here looks forward to the time of restoration mentioned in vs. 14–20.

Feed. Or, “pasture.” The prophet here employs a familiar OT figure, where the people of God are likened to sheep under a good “shepherd” (see Ps. 23).

14. Daughter of Zion. That is, Jerusalem (see on Isa. 1:8).

15. Taken away. The prophet here shows that Jerusalem will rejoice because her “judgments,” made necessary through sin, have been removed, and her “enemy” has been “cast out.”

Thine enemy. That is, those who have oppressed Judah. Here, in particular, Zephaniah refers to the Babylonians.

In the midst. See Isa. 12:6; Rev. 21:3; 22:3.

16. Slack. From the Heb. *raphah*, “to sink down,” “to drop,” or “to decline.” “To drop the hands” is an idiomatic expression meaning “to lose heart,” or “to lose courage.”

17. In the midst. See vs. 5, 15.

He will rest. The LXX of this clause reads, “He will renew thee in his love.”

With singing. The measure of love and joy held by God for His people is so great that God is represented as singing.

18. Sorrowful. While in exile, those faithful to God were deprived of the privilege of attending the holy festivals (see on Hosea 2:11). By faith the prophet looks forward to a time when the true sons of God will be gathered to worship Him, undisturbed by any “reproach.”

19. Undo. Or, “deal with” (RSV).

Save her that halteth. It is ever the Lord’s work to help those who need help, those who may be stumbling along life’s way. God expects us to cooperate with Him in extending such help to others (see 6T 458).

20. Bring you. The prophet closes his book with a glorious picture of promise, stressing the future day of restoration from Babylonian captivity (see pp. 31, 32).

A praise. God intended that Israel should receive the highest honor “among all people.” But Israel failed to live up to her possibilities, and these glorious promises can receive fulfillment in their fullness only through the redeemed church of the Lord (see pp. 35, 36).

Saith the Lord. The very last words of Zephaniah’s prophecy are an affirmation of the certainty of the prophet’s message, for it rests on the word of a never-failing God.

ELLEN G. WHITE COMMENTS

12–176T 457

13 ML 331

14 6T 63

14–17PK 391; 8T 278

16, 17 Ev 282

17 COL 207; DA 151; FE 465, 480; ML 238, 289; 6T 63, 125; WM 93

18–206T 458

19, 20 PK 390

20 8T 14

²Nichol, F. D. (1978). *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary : The Holy Bible with exegetical and expository comment*. Commentary Reference Series (Zep 2:14). Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association.